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ABSTRACT

This study examined parental beliefs regarding developmentally appropriate preschool programming. A survey instrument based on National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) was designed to assess beliefs concerning: (1) curricular goals; (2) teaching strategies; (3) guidance of socio-emotional development; (4) aesthetic development; (5) motivation; (6) parent-teacher relations; (7) assessment of children; (8) program entry; and (9) staffing. The survey was distributed to 160 parents of both preschool and K-3 normally achieving children and children with handicapping conditions in western New York State. Findings revealed that parents of normally achieving school age children indicated a better knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices than parents of preschool children and school-age children with handicaps. Teacher-directed instruction was more favored by parents of children with handicapping conditions, and the majority of all parents felt that paper and pencil tasks and coloring were more important than play activities using play dough, sand, and painting. (A copy of the parent survey is appended.) (MDM)

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Parents' Beliefs regarding Early Childhood Education

(Birth to Third Grade)

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SPECIAL AND REGULAR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Abstract

A survey of parent beliefs regarding developmentally appropriate preschool programming was conducted. An instrument based on National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) was developed and distributed. Items were designed to assess beliefs concerning curricular goals, teaching strategies, guidance of socio-emotional development, and aesthetic development, motivation, parent-teacher relations, assessment of children, program entry and staffing. The 160 respondents were parents of both preschool through school age normally achieving children and children with handicapping conditions. Both urban and suburban schools in Western New York were included in the sample. Findings reveal that parents of normally achieving preschoolers responded significantly more appropriately on this instrument than parents of preschool and school-age children with handicapping conditions. Likewise, parents of normally achieving school age children responded significantly more appropriately than parents of preschool children with handicapping conditions. Statistical analyses suggest the following: all parent groups responded inappropriately to Item 10 (physical development) and more parents believe that children need paper/pencil tasks and coloring than play activities using play dough, sand and painting. Significant differences were also found between parents of normally achieving children and parents of children with handicapping conditions on items focusing on teaching strategies. Teacher-directed instruction was more favored by parents of children with handicapping conditions. Items involving the word "play" had lower mean scores than other items. This study suggests major belief systems exist between parents of children with handicapping conditions and parents of normally achieving students. Given the importance of parents in achieving the Goals 2000, special attention must be given to increasing parental understanding of DAP and Preferred Practices — especially in its relationship to play and its importance in development.

Parents' Beliefs regarding Early Childhood Education (Birth to Third Grade)

The quality of our nation's educational system has come under intense public scrutiny in the 1980's. The field of early childhood education must examine it's practices in light of current knowledge of child development and learning. A trend toward increased emphasis on formal instruction in academic skills has emerged in early childhood programs. This trend is based on misconceptions about early learning. (Elkind, 1986).

Several trends have contributed to the need for clear definitions of appropriate practice for all children including the trend toward increased numbers of infants and toddlers in group care, the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood programs and the concern that kindergarten and even prekindergarten programs were becoming watered-down first grades with too much emphasis on teacher-directed instruction in narrowly defined academic skills. The National Association for the Education for the Education of young Children (NAEYC) has established the first formal set of quality program criteria. This document, Developmentally Appropriate Practices in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8 (NAEYC, 1987) represents the early childhood professions consensus definition of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs. The definition contained within the document includes two dimensions of developmental appropriateness: age appropriateness and individual appropriateness.

1. **Age appropriateness**. Human development research indicates that there are universal, predictable sequences of growth and change that occur in children

during the first 9 years of life. These predictable changes occur in all domains of development- physical emotional, social, and cognitive. Knowledge of typical development of children within the age span served by the program provides a framework from which teachers prepare the learning environment and plan appropriate experiences.

2. **Individual appropriateness**. Each child is a unique person with an individual pattern and timing of growth, as well as individual personality, learning style, and family background. Both the curriculum and adults interactions with children should be responsive to individual differences. Learning in young children is the result of interaction between the child's thoughts and experiences with materials, ideas, and people. These experiences should match the child's developing abilities while also challenging the child's interest and understanding.

The themes of partnership, continuity. and parent education are familiar dimensions of the early childhood education field. Parents' participation in the development and education of their children is not new in America. Before there was a public education system many groups taught their off spring the knowledge, wisdom, and skills they had. Parents and representatives of their groups controlled their children's education. Our public school system was founded by parents and their civic minded allies. Parental involvement and endorsement of school is important. Family endorsement of school has been shown to affect children's self-esteem, self-discipline, mental health, and long-term aspiration Greenberg {1989}. Bailey and Wolery (1992) indicated that intervention is more likely to be effective if it is consistent with parent's goals and priorities.

Research in the 1960's and 1970's concluded that family variables were more

powerful than school variables in predicting academic performance (Coleman, 1966; Jencks, 1972). Honig (1976) proposed a Parents' Bill of Rights that included access to knowledge about child development and child observation skills. Goals for children are best achieved if the important adults in their lives agree on and are consistent about the way they deal with children. Home-school continuity has positive effects on the child.

The Early C. ildhood Task Force of the National Association of State Boards of Education recently issued reports, titled Right From the Start & Caring Communities which focus on school reform in the early years of education (through age 8). The report calls for elementary schools to establish early childhood units that launch new plans for parental outreach and family support in which parents are valued as primary influences in the children's lives and are essential partners in their education (Schultz & Lombardi, 1989).

There is also a need for the convergence of early childhood education (ECE) and early childhood special education (ECSE) if the quantity and quality of services for all children is to be expanded (Raab and Whaley, 1992). Issues of concern in the early childhood special education debate need to address parents' attitudes regarding Developmentally Appropriate and Practices. Points of convergence of ECE and ECSE include a focus of family as partners in educational planning. The new model of ECSE combines ECSE and DAP. This model is: child initiated and directed/ adult supported, play oriented, within an natural environment, activity based and family centered, (Davis, Kilgo and Gamel-McCormick, 1992). The general goals of early education for children with special needs include supporting families. In achieving their own goals, the

nature of the support should be focused on families' definitions of their needs and priorities, (Wolery et al. 1992).

The purpose of this study is to further our understanding by examining parents' who are the child's first teachers, beliefs regarding childhood education for normally achieving children and children with handicapping conditions and to identify those beliefs which support inappropriate practices and developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood programs. Action plans can thus be identified for strengthening cooperation between families and early childhood & early childhood special education programs to collaborate and define practices and investigate their appropriateness in agreement with the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) quality standards and the Division of Early Childhood, Council for Exceptional Children's Recommended Practices.

Instrumentation

Based upon guidelines outlined in Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8 NAEYC, (1987) the survey, Parents' Beliefs Regarding Early Childhood Programs (PBRECE), (see Appendix A) was developed to assess parents' knowledge of appropriate practice. Items were created to assess beliefs in the sub-areas described in the document. These included beliefs concerning: curriculum goals, teacher strategies, guidance of socioemotional development, language development, physical and aesthetic development, motivation, parent-teacher relations, assessment of children, program entry and staffing. The survey was modeled after the "Educators Beliefs Regarding Preschool Programming" (Hoot,

Bartkowiak, and Goupil, 1988)

Two responses (A or B) were developed to clearly delineate between knowledge of appropriate and inappropriate practice for young children. Items were randomly assigned a number in the survey instrument as were the appropriate and inappropriate responses randomly assigned for each item. Appropriate responses were scored as 1 and inappropriate responses as 0. The survey required 5 minutes to complete.

Sample

The sample for this study was 160 parents of handicapped and normally achieving , preschool - grade 3 children enrolled in public and private schools, preschools and day care centers. The sample was representative of all socioeconomic levels. The sample was divided into 4 groups.

Group 1 represents 54 parents of normally achieving preschool children enrolled in 2 day care centers and a public preschool program.

Group 2 represents 30 parents of preschool handicapped children enrolled in a private program for children with disabilities.

Group 3 represents 60 parents of normally achieving school age (grades k-3) from a rural public school.

Group 4 represents 16 parents of handicapped school age (grades k-3) from a private program for children with disabilities.

The subjects selected for this study were from programs which the researchers were familiar and represented urban, suburban and rural districts.

Methodology

In the Fall of 1990, 200 surveys were distributed to parents directly and through teachers. School district administrators, program directors and teachers were contacted for their approval prior to the survey distribution. The following number of surveys were delivered to each of the groups: Group 1- 60 ; Group 2 - 50; Group 3 - 70 ; Group 4 - 16. The 160 returned, represent 80% return on the instrument.

An ANOVA was conducted to test for the differences in the mean scores between the four groups. The results are reported on Table 1. A significant difference was found between the groups.

Table 1. Comparison of Parental Attitudes About Developmentally Appropriate Practices

Parents of	Groups	Mean	SD	Range of Scores
Normally Achieving Preschool Children	1	13.31	8.76	2 - 17
Handicapped Preschool Children	2	9.57	6.82	6 - 17
Normally Achieving School Age Children	3	12.80	9.82	9 - 17
Handicapped School Age Children	4	10.63	7.23	5 - 17

Table 2. Statistically significant mean differences between parent groups determined by the Scheffe Test

	Normally Achieving Preschool Children	Handicapped Preschool	Normally Achieving School-age	Handicapped School-age
	1	2	3	4
Group 1	13.31	9.57	12.80	10.63
Group 2	25.96			
Group 3		20.086		
Group 4	8.53			

Table 2 shows the group means which were significantly different: Group 1- Responses of parents of normally achieving preschool children were significantly different than Group 2 - Parents of preschool children with handicapping conditions responses

Group 1 - Responses of parents of normally achieving preschool children were significantly different than Group 4 - Parents of school age children with handicapping conditions

Group 3 - Parents of normally achieving school - age children and Group 2 - Parents of preschool children with handicapping conditions

It can be concluded that the mean correct responses of parents of normally achieving preschool children is significantly better than the parents of preschool and school - age children with handicapping conditions. Will inclusion of children with handicapping conditions within a regular education preschool setting result in a change in the parents' belief systems? Will that change be in favor of NAEYC's DAP & DEC's Recommended Practices?

A χ^2 test was applied to the individual items on the survey for parents of preschool children with handicapping conditions (Group 2) and parents of normally achieving preschool children (Group 1). Table 3 shows the significant findings.

Table 3. Comparison by item for Parents of Normally Achieving Preschool Children and Parents of Preschool Children with Handicapping Conditions.

Item No.	Topic	χ^2
4	Teaching Strategies	4.56
9	Language Development & Literacy	10.95
11	Aesthetic Development	11.43

Parent responses to item 4 which investigates Teaching Strategies; children learn better through teacher directed instruction or through interaction with teacher-prepared environments. Parents of preschool children with handicapping conditions beliefs coincided with appropriate practices.

Parent responses to item 9 which investigates Language Development and Literacy; young children's reading, writing and speaking can be best developed through emphasizing letter recognitions, printing activities and skill development or experiences involving play, listening, reading stories and informal communication. Parents of preschool children with handicapping conditions (Group 2) scored higher than all other groups. Parents of school - age children with handicapping conditions scored the lowest.

What happens from the time children leave the preschool years? Will the trend toward formal academic instruction for younger children which is based on misconceptions about early learning filter down to preschool?

Parent responses to items 10 and 15 were low for all groups. Item 10 explored whether pencil and paper tasks and coloring or play activities such as playdough, sand and painting were more appropriate practices. Parents need to understand the importance of play with real objects and events before young children are able to understand the meaning of symbols such as letters, and numbers and develop small muscle skills through these activities. This item demonstrates the need for further research and recommendations for implementation.

Item 15 investigates program entry. NAEYC guidelines suggest kindergarten age children who have been determined to lack school readiness through screening tests should be allowed entrance regardless of developmental level

rather than denied entry to kindergarten. Mean scores ranged from a score of .67 achieved by parents of handicapped preschool children to a low score of .31 for the parents of school-age children with handicapping conditions.

We the early childhood educators must impress upon parents and educational leaders that children are born ready to learn and that we must promote their growth and development and be ready for them as they enter the school environment.

Table 4 shows the mean scores for the particular areas that warranted further study of appropriate practices and beliefs among parents. The areas include: Curriculum Goals, Teaching Strategies, Socioemotional Development, Aesthetic Development and Program Entry.

Table 4. Group Mean Differences by Criteria

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
	Norm. Ach. Pre-K	Handicapped Pre-K	Norm. Ach. School-age	Handicapped School-age
	N = 54	N = 30	N = 60	N = 16
Curricular Goals	.89	.93	.73	.75
Teacher Strategies	.72	.87	.67	.63
Guidance - Socio-Emotional Dev.	.61	.73	.70	.88
Language Develop.	.43	.80	.58	.31
Physical and Aesthetic Develop.	.22	.40	.27	.31
Grouping	.76	.70	.88	.75
Program Entry	.57	.67	.50	.31

Items 2,4,6,7 & 16 were grouped together since they focus on Teaching Strategies. Teacher-directed instruction is compared to children interaction with teacher-prepared environments. A significant difference was found demonstrating that parents of normally achieving children beliefs coincided with DAP, 570, as compared to 315 parents of children with handicapping conditions.

The question of teaching strategies being more directed in relationship to handicapping conditions needs further study. Cognitive theories, their application to children with special needs and research regarding the effects on learning must be pursued.

A closer look at the data revealed additional interesting findings. Items 1,2,9, and 10 involve the word "play". These items were found to have lower mean scores for most of the parent groups. Many parents in our study did not equate child-initiated activity and spontaneous play with learning or cognitive development. Further research is necessary to understand parents' beliefs regarding the value of play for all children. Play is the primary vehicle for children's learning. It enables them to progress along the developmental stages and is an essential component of developmentally appropriate practice. Much of young children's learning takes place when they direct their own play activities (Powell, 1989). Workbooks, worksheets, coloring books, and paper-pencil tasks are not appropriate for young children especially those younger than six (Bredekamp, 1987). This is especially important today with Goals 2000 and parents and community working together in improving learning. Do we as early childhood educators want formal instruction in academic skill emphasized due to social, economic and political forces?

Discussion

In general, parents on this study appeared to have a reasonable knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices for young children as measured by NAEYC guidelines. However, the lack of understanding about developmentally appropriate practices on the part of many parents is largely the result of the failure of early childhood professionals to clearly articulate what they do and why they do it. With the identification of misconceptions and issues, planning can be initiated to promote Developmentally Appropriate Practices and Recommended Practices.

Parents of school-aged handicapped children had the lowest mean score on items nine, ten, and two, Teaching strategies. Do parents of handicapped children feel pressure toward doing academic skills to help their child achieve? Parents of school-aged handicapped children chose teacher-directed lessons over play oriented activities; letter recognition, singing alphabet songs etc. over experiences involving play and pencil-paper task over play activities such as playdough, sand and painting. A question needing further study is whether play affects higher developmental processes than basic skills.

Parents of school-aged handicapped children also had the lowest mean score in regards to denying children entry into kindergarten who have been determined to lack school readiness through screening tests. Parents from all groups seemed to share this belief. Parents of handicapped children may have reflected attitudes of inappropriate programs where the child has to fit the school. The NAEYC guideline believes there is a place for every child of legal entry age, regardless of the developmental level of the child. The educational system should adjust to the

developmental to adapt to an inappropriate system.

Parents of preschool handicapped children achieved a mean score of (.43) compared to score of (.87, .85, and .88) in regards to aesthetic development. It would appear that this group of parents believe that art and music should be provided only when time permits and by formal instruction. Again, the emphasis is on skills rather than on learning information through meaningful context. Do parents of handicapped children view art and music as something extra after the academics are stressed?

A surprising result was in regards to item fourteen. Parents in all groups (.85, .87, .98, and .88) believe that decisions about young children's school admission, retention and assignment to remedial classes are best determined by teacher-parent observation rather than standardized tests. Teachers have often said parents wanted the tests, so we have used them although we would rather not. Further study regarding testing and evaluation is necessary to reflect children's ongoing learning.

Significant differences were found between parents of handicapped preschool children and parents of normally achieving preschool children. What are the implications when children have handicapping conditions? The survey also identified areas and issues regarding inappropriate practices and adaptations for children with disabilities. These particular issues need further research and an identification of strategies to implement courses of action, for all teachers in day care, preschool and the primary groups, for parents and local leadership, federal policies, state government, employers and voluntary agencies. Research studies in the 1960's and 1970's concluded that family variables were more powerful

than school variables in predicting academic performance. What can we do to build additional support for families to accomplish the first National Education Goal by the year 2000, "All children in America will start school ready to learn".

We the early childhood professionals involved in regular and special education must clearly articulate how children learn and factors which constitute sound early childhood education. With the identification of misconceptions and issues, "planning can be initiated to promote the development, adaptive functioning and independence in a variety of relevant contexts consistent with family values and priorities" Wolery, et al (1992). What can we do to help parents understand Developmentally Appropriate Practices and Preferred Practices especially in relationship to play and its importance in development?

Venn and Wolery (1991) indicate that it requires careful assessment of the child, careful planning of the program and continued monitoring and adjustment. This process allows for providing effective early education, adaptation of DAP classrooms with the inclusion of children with developmental delays and disabilities.

A report of the National Task Force on School Readiness (1991) recommends that communities should help parents meet their needs for health care, child care, and family support through quality public programs, enhanced initiatives by employers, and stronger informal efforts by voluntary organizations and individuals. It also recommends that elementary schools implement developmentally appropriate teaching and assessment, based on our understanding of how young children learn and develop and strengthen efforts in parent involvement and work with community agencies to provide appropriate

and effective services to children and families. An exemplary program encourages parents to volunteer and participate in school by matching the teachers and needs of specific students with parent volunteer choices decided upon at early childhood planning sessions. These sessions include an early child developmental screening inventory and parent questionnaire such as Meisels' Developmental Screening in early childhood: A Guide. Developmental screening is based on the premise that a child's skills, abilities, and intelligence are not fixed. Studies have demonstrated that early intervention can significantly alter the potential of many children who are at risk during their early years of live. (Consortium for longitudinal studies, 1983). The Family Matters approach to home-school communication is based on respect for divergent opinions, cooperative problem solving, and the belief that children benefit when the adults around them function as capable, responsible partners in the educational process. Caring Communities (1991) suggests that good schools for young children welcome family members to observe and work with children in classrooms. One important benefit of parents working in classrooms is to help connect activities with the language and culture of the home and community.

The Task Force recommends that an Early Childhood Leadership Forum would include political and business leaders, voluntary agency representatives, public school staff members, parents, health care providers and early childhood and family support service workers. This group would lead planning and action. and begin with a comprehensive assessment of the status of children and families within a community. Wolery, Strain & Bailey (1992) concluded that young children with special needs should receive their early education in programs

adhering to the NAEYC and NEC/SDE guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice and appropriate curriculum; however, they also concluded that those programs must be adjusted to provide the best possible education to children with special needs.

The research reported within this article indicates that parents of normally achieving children and children with disabilities beliefs coincide reasonably well with Developmentally Appropriate Practices and Preferred Practices. The researchers conclude that parents should be given positive recognition as experts on their own children. Empowering parents with the knowledge of how children learn is vital to the the success of home and school communication and children's school success.

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Appendix

PARENTS' BELIEFS REGARDING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (0-3 Years Old)

CHECK THE BOXES THAT PERTAIN TO YOUR CHILD/ CHILDREN

Child's age/s _____

Grade/s_____

Prekindergarten_____

Day Care_____

Does Not Attend School_____

Your child has a handicapping condition:

Yes _____ No_____

Unknown _____

Check A or B for each question.

1. Should young children learn:
   A. ____ Through child centered activities (e.g. sand, role playing)
   B. ____ Teaching by separate subject areas (e.g. math, science)

2. Should young children learn through:
   A. ____ Teacher-directed lessons.
   B. ____ Play oriented activities.

3. Should a child's learning style, ability and rate be based on:
   A. ____ Observation of children's abilities and interests.
   B. ____ Standardized tests.

4. Children learn better through:
   A. ____ Teacher-directed instruction.
   B. ____ Interaction with teacher-prepared environments.

5. Are the following teacher/child ratios for young children necessary to support developmentally appropraite programs?
   2 adults / 20 children for three and four year olds.
   1 adult / 15-18 children for five to eight year olds.
   A. ____ Yes
   B. ____ No

6. Children learn better through:
   A. ____ Hands-on activities.
   B. ____ Workbook activities.

7. Should the greater portion of your child's day be spent in:
   A. ____ Learning in a group.
   B. ____ Informal small group activities.

8. Appropriate behavior can best be learned by children:
   A. ____ Modeling encouraging expected behavior.
   B. ____ Establishing and reinforcing rules.

9. Young children's reading, writing, and speaking can best be developed through emphasizing:
   A. ____ Letter recognition, singing alphabet songs, printing activities and skill development.
   B. ____ Experiences involving play, listening, reading stories, and informal communication.

10. Pre-writing skills are better developed through:
   A. ____ Pencil and paper tasks and coloring.
   B. ____ Play activities such as playdough, sand and painting.

11. Young children's expression and apprecitaion of music and art can best be developed through:
   A. ____ Formal art and music instruction.
   B. ____ Experimenting with a variety of musical and art media.

12. Children are motivated to become interested in learning through:
   A. ____ Encouragement and natural curiosity.
   B. ____ Correction and rewards.

13. Good parent/teacher relationships results from:
   A. ____ Child progress conferences.
   B. ____ Ongoing communication.

14. Decisions about young children's school admission, retention and assignment to remedial classes are best determined by:
   A. ____ Teacher/parent observation.
   B. ____ Standardized tests.

15. Kindergarten age children who have been determined to lack school readiness through screening tests should be:
   A. ____ Denied entry into kindergarten.
   B. ____ Allowed entrance regardless of development level.

16. In light of the contemporary social demands should programs for young children emphasize:
   A. ____ Technological development over physical, social and emotional development.
   B. ____ Intellectual, physical, social and emotional develop equally.

17. Do you feel the following models for grouping young children would improve early childhood education: multi-age grouping, team teaching, assigning a group of children and staff to work together over a few years.
   A. ____ Yes
   B. ____ No

Comments: